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## Historical-Grammatical Interpretation of Scripture

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# HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

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**Holy Scripture should be read and  
studied with utmost care as God's revelation  
of Himself to humanity.**

**T**he study of basic principles and procedures for faithfully and accurately interpreting Scripture is called biblical hermeneutics.

Scripture-based principles for interpreting the Bible were recovered by the Protestant Reformers of the 16th century. These principles were combined with advances in textual and historical-grammatical analysis made during the Renaissance era, leading to a robust Protestant hermeneutic that has carried on through post-Reformation times till today. Commonly known as the his-

torical-grammatical method (or historical-biblical method), this approach to Scripture is currently adopted by conservative evangelical Christians, including the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

There are four major foundational principles for biblical interpretation that arise from scriptural evidence.

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The first was the battle cry of the Protestant Reformation: *sola Scriptura*, “by Scripture alone.” This principle affirms that the Bible alone takes precedence over every other source of authority, and constitutes the all-sufficient foundation and test for all additional knowledge and experience (Isa. 8:20; Matt. 15:3, 6).

A second principle is *tota Scriptura*, which affirms that *all Scripture*—the entirety of the Old and New Testaments—is inspired by God, literally “God-breathed,” and thus fully authoritative (2 Tim. 3:16, 17). The Bible is an inseparable union of the divine and the human. The Bible in its entirety *equals*—not just *contains*—the Word of God (2 Peter 1:19-21).

A third principle, the analogy of Scripture, affirms a fundamental unity and harmony among the various parts of Scripture, since they are inspired by the same Spirit. Because of this underlying unity, the Bible is its own interpreter, and Scripture may be compared with Scripture to understand the Bible’s teaching on a given topic (Luke 24:27, 44, 45; 1 Cor. 2:13). The meaning of the various parts of Scripture is clear and straightforward, to be taken in their plain, literal sense unless an obvious figure is intended (John 16:25, 29).

A fourth general principle affirms that spiritual things are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:11, 14). This means that the interpreter can rightly

comprehend Scripture only through the illumination of the Spirit of God, who inspired the Scriptures. It also implies the necessity for the Spirit’s transformation of the interpreter’s heart (John 7:17), so that there is earnest prayer for understanding and willingness to accept by faith and obey what Scripture says (Ps. 119:33).

Building upon the foundational principles of interpretation, the historical-grammatical method adopts practical guidelines for interpreting biblical passages that either explicitly or implicitly arise from Scripture itself.

The first task in interpreting Scripture is to ensure that what is studied is indeed the Holy Scriptures—both in the original languages and in modern translation. This requires attention to ascertain the original text of the Bible as fully as possible and to make sure that this text is translated into modern languages as faithfully as possible.

The Bible has been carefully and painstakingly preserved through the centuries, and variation among the many extant manuscripts is very small. There are, nonetheless, small variations, arising either from scribal errors or intentional changes during the history of textual transmission. The science (or art) of recovering the original biblical text is termed textual study. The final standard for all textual study must be found within Scripture itself and must be carried



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out in the context of the unity of Scripture.

After the original biblical text has been ascertained, its form and content must be represented accurately and clearly in modern translation. There are several different translation types: formal “word-for-word equivalency” translations; dynamic “meaning-for-meaning equivalency” translations; a combination of formal and dynamic approaches; and interpretive paraphrases. Each type has scriptural precedent and positive and negative features, but the “word-for-word equivalency” versions are best for serious Bible study.

A second guideline in the interpretive process involves understanding the historical context of the passage under study. The historical context includes the historical background, authorship, and date of the biblical passage. Following scriptural self-testimony, the historical context of biblical accounts is to be accepted at face value as accurate—even more reliable than secular history because it is presented from the omniscient divine perspective.

The historical background material within Scripture is augmented by the wealth of illumination provided by the literature of antiquity and archaeological discoveries, and involves history, chronology, geography, and other aspects of biblical culture. Most of the apparent historical discrepancies between the biblical record and

secular history have evaporated in light of further study, but the events of Scripture are ultimately accepted because of a settled faith in the trustworthy Word of God.

A third specific hermeneutical guideline involves the literary context of Scripture. The Bible is not only a history book but also a literary work of art. The delimitations of a passage must be recognized in terms of paragraphs, passages, or stanzas, to see how this segment fits into the flow of the larger thought-unit of which the passage is a part.

It is also necessary to understand what type of literature is being studied. This includes the more general categories of prose and poetry. The poetic sections of Scripture (some 40 percent of the Old Testament and scattered sections of the New Testament) are characterized by the distinctive features of parallelism (“thought-rhyme”), meter (“measured lines”) and other literary conventions. The prose sections, and in particular biblical narrative, have been the object of much recent study, revealing the artistry involved in relating the narrative. There are also specific literary types, many explicitly identified by the Bible itself, each of which has specific characteristics. Recognizing specific literary types is often significant in interpreting the message that is transmitted.

Also important in the literary context is the literary structure of a



biblical passage, which often provides a key to the flow of thought or central theological themes. The literary structure of a section of Scripture may sometimes be seen most clearly through outlining the passage by themes and sub-themes. The literary structure must be allowed to emerge from within Scripture and not be artificially imposed.

A fourth guideline for the interpretation of Scripture is the verse-by-verse analysis of a biblical passage, with attention to grammar, sentence construction, and the meaning of individual words. Though a thorough acquaintance with biblical languages is ideal, study tools are now available to introduce the interpreter to the unique grammatical-syntactical features of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. It is helpful to diagram the biblical passage to better grasp its flow of thought. Careful attention must be paid to crucial individual words, studying them in their immediate and wider contexts (by means of concordances, lexicons, and theological wordbooks) to grasp their precise meaning in the biblical passage.

A fifth hermeneutical guideline involves the theological context and analysis of a passage. There are various methods for studying the Bible: the book-by-book approach; the verse-by-verse exposition of a passage; thematic-topical study; investigation from the perspective of the “grand central theme” of Scripture;

and literary-structural study. Problematic passages—especially involving questions of the justice of God (theodicy) and alleged “faulty” theology in Scripture—may be approached by recognizing important biblical principles that arise from within Scripture.

Some parts of Scripture inherently point to a fulfillment beyond themselves, as in prophecy and typology; other parts point to an extended meaning beyond themselves, as in symbolism and parables. Each of these kinds of theological material in Scripture calls for special attention, and from within Scripture emerge principles for its interpretation.

A final guideline in the interpretation of Scripture relates to the contemporary application of the biblical materials. From the scriptural self-testimony, it becomes evident that the contemporary application arises naturally out of its theological interpretation. Scripture is universal and permanent in its application, unless Scripture itself gives specific indication limiting the applicability. Though biblical revelation is relevant to all cultures and times, it was also addressed to a particular culture and time, and therefore time and place must be taken into account in its application. Here again, Scripture itself provides the controls as to when it is appropriate to reduce specific instruction to a general principle.

The final goal of interpreting



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Scripture is to make practical application of each passage to the individual life. The interpreter must seek to understand how each passage applies to one's personal life. The Scriptures should ultimately be read and accepted as God's living and active Word to our souls!

In contrast with the historical-grammatical method, another major method of biblical interpretation arose during the time of the Enlightenment (17th century), which has become known as the historical-critical method. Based upon the secular methods of historical science, the central presupposition of the historical-critical method is the rationalist principle of *criticism* (or "methodological doubt"). According to this principle, nothing is accepted authoritatively at face value; everything must be verified or corrected by rationally re-examining the evidence. In this approach, the Bible is always open to correction, and therefore the human interpreter is the final determiner of truth. His or her reason is the final test of authenticity.

Some evangelical—and Seventh-day Adventist—scholars have recently attempted to "rehabilitate" the historical-critical method by removing its anti-supernatural bias and other objectionable features and retaining the method with its criticism. The presence or absence of the fundamental

principle of criticism is really the litmus test of whether or not critical methodology is being employed. Based upon the Bible's self-testimony, the historical-grammatical approach rejects the principle of criticism; it *analyzes*, but refuses to *critique* the Bible; it accepts the text of Scripture at face value as true.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has formally rejected the historical-critical method in favor of the historical-grammatical method. According to the report of the Methods of Bible Study Committee, voted at Annual Council in 1986, "even a modified use of [the historical-critical] method that retains the principle of criticism which subordinates the Bible to human reason is unacceptable to Adventists."<sup>\*</sup>

The Seventh-day Adventist Church affirms the hermeneutic of the biblical writers and the Protestant Reformation, and rejects the historical-critical method of the Enlightenment and its later developments. In the spirit of the Reformers, Seventh-day Adventists continually seek to base all their presuppositions and principles of interpretation, their faith and practice, upon the absolute authority of God's infallible Word. □

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<sup>\*</sup>*The Adventist Review* (January 22, 1987), p. 18.

